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REVIEWS

ORAL ENGLISH IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The growing interest in oral English is beginning to bear fruit in the form of textbooks for the pupils and manuals for the teacher, as well as records of individual experience both here and abroad. It is the purpose of this brief review to call attention to a recent example of each of these classes.

Miss Ward's *Oral Composition*¹ is a textbook for high schools, presumably for the later years. A brief Introduction sets forth some of the reasons why we should know how to speak. The conditions of good speaking are then laid down. They are conceived to be preparation, conditioning expression by thought, and ready control of the body. Each of the traditional forms of discourse is treated in a separate chapter, and the work is completed by the addition of outlines for practice, topics for special occasions, examples of speeches, and other similar material.

As the author points out, many of the assignments might be written, and hence no additional text in composition would be necessary. Indeed, the chief objection to which the book seems to be open is that there is so little to distinguish it from the various rehashes of the rhetorical categories within which certain well-known writers have succeeded in confining all our current thought about the art of composition. The point of view remains that of one who selects exercises to illustrate certain elements of technique instead of subordinating technique to those expressional needs and opportunities which the daily lives of the pupils embrace. In short, the end is still to teach the science rather than the art of composition. This holds true even of those parts of the book which are most distinctively in the nature of exercises in speech. The theory of gesture, for example, is all but worthless, if not positively inhibitive to pupils in high school.

Miss Bolenius² presents, not a textbook for the pupils, but a guide for the teacher. She states that her brief handbook is the outgrowth

¹ *Oral Composition*. By CORNELIA CARHART WARD. New York: MacMillan, 1914. Pp. ix+412.

² *The Teaching of Oral English*. By EMMA MILLER BOLENIUS. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1914. Pp. xii+214.

of several years of experimenting with oral English in a private school and in a large city high school. The contents bear evidence of this. The book throughout is charged with the intimacy of personal experience, and it contains numerous verbatim accounts of lessons as they were actually developed.

The method is that which is coming to be known as the social method, which consists essentially in regarding a class as a typical social group and helping it to realize through its own initiative the largest possibility of growth and control. A good illustration of this is provided by chap. vii, entitled "A Mythological Symposium." The game begins with an invitation to the class in ancient history to attend a symposium at the Olympian Council on Thursday morning. When the time comes, Jupiter leads Mars, Apollo, and the other deities in, seats them in state, and opens the council. Each gives an account of himself in turn, and from this vivid presentation all go away with their ideas of Greek mythology much clarified. Of course the class in history is allowed to reciprocate.

This sort of thing is very disconcerting, not to say irritating, to the traditionalist, accustomed to pride himself upon the difficulty of his work and the number of failures which he reports at the end of each term. Having completely identified the hard with the disagreeable and the apparently useless, he looks upon any attempt to give school activities something of the zest of the playground as wicked, abandoned, and educationally subversive. For his part he will be thorough. He forgets, however, that there is no such incentive to thoroughness as a definite occasion upon which to use one's acquirement, and no criticism so respected and feared as the criticism of one's peers and immediate associates.

To all who are aware that high-school English is being rapidly transformed, the experience of Miss Bolenius will be both stimulative and suggestive. The exact devices which she used may never prove serviceable again, but the principles and motives which they illustrate are fundamental and will one day characterize the English studies of the high school. It is along the lines in which she has been experimenting and not by shaping secondary work with reference to formal prescriptions made by higher institutions that greater effectiveness in the use of the mother tongue must be sought in the high school.

The representative of the third class of books mentioned above comes from England. Three numbers of the *Perse Playbooks* have previously been issued. Nos. 1 and 2 dealt with dramatizations, and No. 3 with poems. The fourth in the series is called *First-Fruits of the Play Method*

*in Prose.*¹ As may be suspected, the body of the book is filled with examples of prose composition by the boys of this well-known school. These are prefaced by a brief statement of the principles underlying the method used and by an essay on the method itself, the first by the headmaster, Mr. W. H. D. Rouse, and the second by the teacher of the boys, Mr. H. Caldwell Cook.

The method described is the social method already referred to. It has been made to involve a degree of self-government which is rare and perhaps not possible in the crowded conditions of many American public schools. The largest measure of pupil control seems to be attained in grades corresponding to the intermediate and grammar grades of our elementary schools. A good example may be noted in the case of the Knightly Guard, a group of six boys who came, through the reading of "Morte d'Arthur," to exercise undisputed sway in their room.

Both the essay on method and the illustrative compositions convey the impression that the work is distinctly bookish. Literary description, so prominent in school compositions and so seldom met with as a self-sustaining unit elsewhere, bulks very large. In most instances a book appears to have been either the inspiration for the form or the source of the matter, or both. Now everyone will admit that the mastery of both vocabulary and style, to say nothing of ideas, comes, if it comes at all, very largely from contact with books. And yet there is something almost uncanny in these pages in which children of tender years discourse in poetic phrases of "A Summer's Eve" and "Sounds Heard in Bed."

Perhaps the fact that except for a report of one lesson, only the written papers of the classes are reproduced is in part the explanation for the preponderance of literary themes. Mr. Cook refers to this in his essay. In any event, it is worth while to have at hand so charming an account of his experiments as the editor gives and if, as seems to be the case, the first-fruits of the play method are of distinctly exotic character, we may expect that the situation will adjust itself through the natural reactions of the boys themselves and that eventually a greater emphasis will be placed upon giving to each command of the vernacular for every ordinary use. Then catholicity of material will be added to naturalness of method.

¹ *Perse Playbooks No. 4: First-Fruits of the Play Method in Prose.* By H. CALDWELL COOK, with a Preface by W. H. D. ROUSE. Cambridge: W. Hefter & Sons, 1914. Pp. 183. 35. net.